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ABSTRACT

Although it is being taken in greater numbers and by increasingly younger people, the General Education Development (GED) test is viewed skeptically by the military, college admission officials, and some employers. The public perception of the GED tends to give it second-class status compared to a high school diploma. However, studies of GED completers and high school competency-test completers show that the holder of a GED certificate shows as much, if not more competence than high school seniors. Why is the GED denigrated as a literacy standard? The military finds GED holders less desirable because their attrition rate is double that of high school graduates. Attrition of GED holders from college courses also appears high. However, this difference may be explained by social and economic factors. The typical GED holder attends college part time, has family responsibilities, holds a job and is financially independent. (The document includes a list of questions to consider in assessing the GED. Resources for additional information are listed. Outline maps showing minimum ages for test credentials and minimum test scores are included.) (CML)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

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MYTH #4:

THE GED IS FOR DUMMIES

It is not the "General Education Diploma." It is the General Education Development testing program.

It is not a separate literacy standard for those who never completed high school, one less demanding. It is normed to the performance of graduating high school seniors.

It apparently is becoming more and more a "second chance" stamp of approval for literacy obtained by younger and younger enrollees. Yet, GED holders are viewed skeptically by the military, college admission officials and some employers. The major reason is that GED holders have less "staying power," but, then, their socio-economic profiles are quite different.

As a literacy issue, one needs to ask that if the GED is becoming the major educational goal for a growing number of young people, particularly those from at-risk populations, are they being short-changed, either by the quality of the education they are receiving or the limits of a GED certificate/diploma?

Why the GED?

During World War II, the American Council on Education, an umbrella group for higher education organizations, began to sponsor a high school equivalency program, the GED, along with the provinces of Canada. Through the G.I. bill, thousands of veterans were seeking to enroll in college without having completed high school years before. The GED was needed to measure their ability to handle college-level courses.

Since then, the GED has earned a permanent niche as a "second chance" high school diploma. More than 450,000 people were awarded a GED diploma in 1987.

To do so, they achieved a state-set minimum score, or a minimum average on five tests--social studies, science, interpreting literature and the arts, writing and mathematics.

Growing Fallback for Youth

The under-17 age category of those taking the GED tests increased from 7.6 percent of the total in 1980 to 9.2 percent in 1986 (the figures for 1987 will be ready within a month). This is the only age group where enrollment has been increasing. The 18-19-year-old group stayed about the same--around 24 percent; and the 20-24-age group dropped, from 28.1 percent to 26.2 percent. Thus, about 60 percent of the GED enrollees are under 25.

Jean Lowe, assistant director of the GED Testing Service, says it is a "hunch," derived from talking to GED program staff around the country, that even more young people are signing up for the GED, having dropped out "or been pushed out" of high schools.

Another source of anecdotal evidence comes from hearings conducted last year for a national study of the status of immigrant children and youth. Older immigrant students testified they had been strongly encouraged to drop out or not enroll in high school and to go for the GED or enroll in adult English language programs instead.

Douglas Whitney, director of the testing service, says the increase in younger age groups could be due to states' lowering their age for compulsory attendance and to the realization by high school dropouts that "it's a tough life without a diploma."

Initially, the GED program was offered only to those 22 and older. However, for some time individual states have been allowed to set their own age minimum because of the variation among them for

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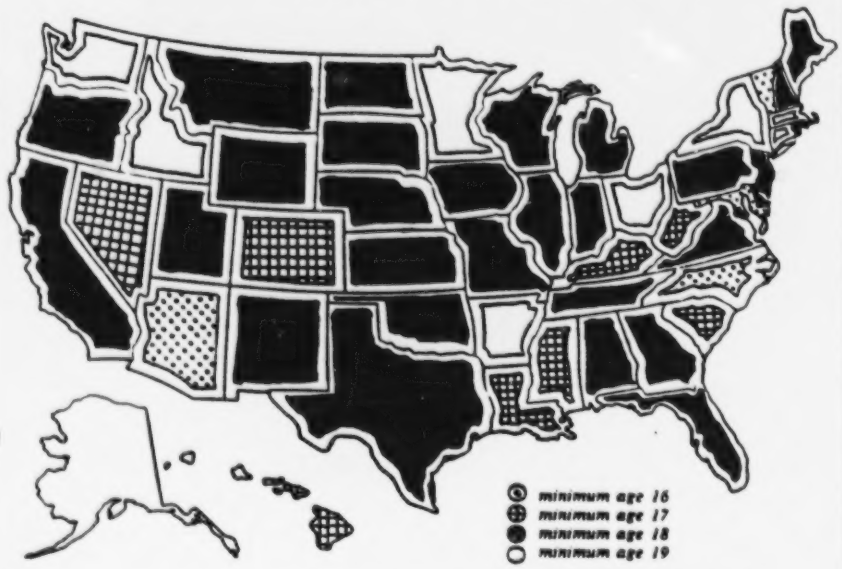
Minimum Age for Test Credentials



compulsory attendance. GED officials urge states to limit the program to those whose grade cohort has completed high school.

What Does a GED test?

The public perception of the GED tends to give it "second class" status, compared to a high school diploma.

As far as its academic requirements are concerned, that is debatable.

A committee of experts from education and measurement establishes the specifications for the tests, e.g. deciding in the version released in January that an essay should be added to the writing skills test.

The tests are written by subject-matter teachers, then field-tested with graduating seniors and adults. Eliminated from the field test are those seniors not expected to graduate with their class and students who will receive alternative diplomas, such as those only for attendance.

The GED tests are tried out in the field every year, but a major revision occurs with a larger sample every few years. Extensive changes were made in 1978; another major new edition was issued this January, and by December all states, Canadian provinces and the territories will be using the new tests.

A widely publicized study of GED holders by the University of Wisconsin/Milwaukee three years ago criticized the 1978 version for being much easier than the previous tests.

However, the GED developers say that isn't their fault. The test is normed to the competencies of high school seniors, and if the items seem easier, it is because of a decline in the academic competence of graduating seniors, says Whitney. Testing of the GED items in 1980 revealed an even further decline in student skills, and the 1987 sampling showed "they had not made a great recovery," he says.

The new tests, besides including a writing sample, emphasize critical thinking skills, but, again, as Lowe points out, the level required depends on what the field tests revealed about the competencies of senior high school students.

Consistently, 31 percent of graduating seniors fail the GED tests in trials. In the field testing of the new items, adults performed better on those requiring critical thinking than did high school students. Whitney says this probably occurred because older test takers have "survived in the real world" and are more able to handle "complicated thinking."

According to GED officials, their testing program is tougher than the competency testing programs in such states as Florida and New York. A study in the latter state, for example, found that 37 percent of those who passed the state's reading test in 1980 failed to pass the GED tests; none who failed the state's test could pass the GED test. A 1985 Florida study concluded that students who cannot pass the mandated student assessment test "are unlikely to succeed on the GED tests," according to an ACE research brief.

After the Wisconsin study of the success rate of GED holders in college (not very good compared to the state's high school graduates), the state

conducted further studies and, consequently, raised its minimum scores to among the highest in the nation--because Wisconsin seniors scored higher. Florida and Oregon conducted similar studies but did not raise their minimums.

Like the SAT, which has a score range of 200 to 800, the GED tests are scored on a scale of 20 to 80. States set their own passing levels, with a minimum on individual tests and an overall minimum average (see box).

Why "Ain't There No Respect" for a GED?

If the holder of a GED certificate shows as much, if not more competence than seniors, with the high school curricula, why is the GED looked down upon as a literacy standard?

For reasons other than academic.

Military recruiters, for example, place GED holders in the second of three tiers as far as preference is concerned. The top tier includes those with at least high school diplomas; the second tier includes GED holders and all others with alternative diplomas, such as from correspondence schools, home study or alternative certificates. The third tier is for high school dropouts.

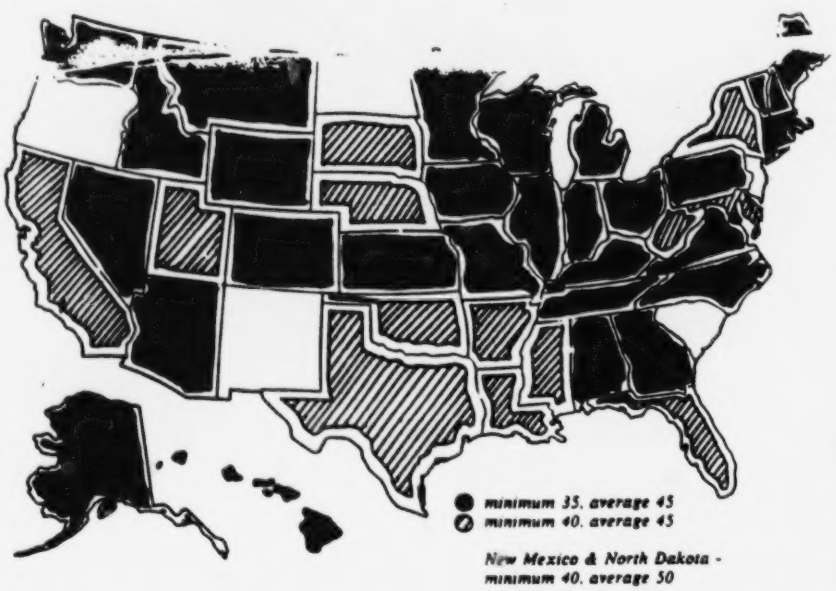
GED holders are less desirable because their attrition rate from the military services is double that of high school graduates--between 55 and 60 percent of GED holders, compared to 80 percent of high school graduates, drop out before the end of their hitch. These data are based on a 20-year study of recruits.

Recent criticism of the military for allegedly denigrating the GED is based on a misunderstanding, says Wayne Sellman of the office that deals with accession to the armed forces in the Department of Defense. GED holders have been in the second tier for a long time. However, beginning last October all recruits with alternative diplomas were placed in the second tier; previously, some of them were categorized as first-tier potential. But after studying the attrition rates of 30,000 recruits with various kinds of alternative diplomas, the decision was made to refine the recruiting policy, according to Sellman.

Statistically, he says, high school graduates have the best chance of success in the military. "A high school diploma means someone has shown tenacity and stick-to-itness," he says. Also, GED holders are required to have slightly higher scores on military entrance tests because, in comparison to those who receive diplomas by other routes, GED holders still have higher attrition rates. DOD estimates that each person who leaves military service prematurely (before 30 months of service) costs $18,400.

The University of Wisconsin study also found that those GED holders who enrolled at campuses in the university system had higher attrition rates, although a majority of those who left were not failing their courses.

Minimum Test Scores


minimum 35, average 45
minimum 40, average 45
New Mexico & North Dakota - minimum 40, average 50
Oregon - 40 each test
South Carolina - 45 average

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Whitney says the attrition rate difference can be explained by social and economic factors. In the Wisconsin study, for example, apples and oranges were being compared. The comparison group of regular students tended to be full-time, younger, with no dependents and receiving at least some support from their families. The typical GED holder, on the other hand, was attending part-time, had a family to take care of, was older and out of high school five years or more and was working part-time or was on his/her own financially.

ACE also claims that 95 percent of employers treat GED holders on a par with high school graduates in terms of entering salaries and job placement.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

* Have enrollments for the GED changed over the last few years? Younger or older enrollees? Immigrants? Increased/decreased enrollments? Have passing rates on the tests changed in any way?

* What is the attitude and experience of local employers toward GED holders? Do GED holders compare well with high school graduates? Are they given equal opportunities/pay with high school graduates? Do employers believe the GED equips workers for the job skills they need in the workplace?

* What is the experience of GED holders in higher education? Do they have equal access? How do their grade point averages and rates of attrition compare to those of high school graduates?

* What is the attitude of local military recruiters toward GED holders? Have they increased/decreased the number of recruits from the GED population?

* What do GED teachers think of the new curricula and how do they plan to teach critical thinking skills? How do their methods differ from high school teachers'?

* Arrange to take your state's high school minimum competency tests and the comparable GED tests, e.g. mathematics and literature/writing tests, and make comparisons.

* Have high school subject-matter teachers critique the GED tests for their subjects.

* What is the attrition rate from GED courses? Are there records showing how many return and complete courses/take GED later? How long does it take for people to complete the GED preparation and pass the tests? How do the costs of this program compare to the costs, for example, of high school students who must repeat a year(s) before receiving a diploma, or to the cost of in-school remedial programs for students who cannot pass state minimum competency tests?

* What is the percentage of GED enrollees who pass the GED tests? The percentage of those who try again? How do GED programs recruit students, keep data?

RESOURCES

General Education Development Testing Service
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Jean Lowe, assistant director

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Pentagon, Room 2B 271
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GED Coordinator, state Departments of Education
(The GED program is administered in cooperation with state education departments. The coordinator probably is located in office that handles adult education).

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(Co-author of Wisconsin study of GED holders' performance in higher education institutions in the state)